Go as a Sangha

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on December 19, 1999 in Plum Village, France

Today is December 19, 1999 and we are in the Upper Hamlet for our Dharma talk. I always think of the year 2000 as a bell of mindfulness, I have been using it as a bell of mindfulness to become aware that time passes very quickly. And we should be there in such a way that can make a future possible for our children and their children, because during the twentieth century we have made a mess and individualism has prevailed. The insight of interbeing, the insight of interconnectedness is so important for us. We have to learn that happiness cannot be possible as an individual matter. So seeking for happiness for your individual self is something impossible, and that is why we have to learn to live as Sangha. Not only humans have to live as a Sangha, but they have to learn to live with other species as a Sangha. We have to accept animals, vegetables and minerals as partners, as members of our Sangha and this way of life, this insight is very clear in the Buddhist teaching. So the most meaningful thing for us to do today, tomorrow and after tomorrow is to prepare ourselves to live as a Sangha.

It means we have to get out of the prison of our self and this is a practice. How to get out of the prison of self. We have been so long in that prison of self, we have suffered so much, we have caused a lot of suffering to other people and other species, and that is why to get out of that kind of prison is our practice.

For many years I have been saying that the next Buddha that will come to us will take the form of a Sangha and not an individual. That is not a fantasy on my part, but the insight I have got through my life, through my experience. The next Buddha may take the form of a Sangha and everyone else will be a cell of the Buddhakaya, the Buddha body, and it is possible for us to prepare ourselves to be that cell in the body of the Buddha.

I always think of the twenty first century as a beautiful hill. It may be a great joy to climb the hill together as a Sangha and with the Sangha we can go very far. No matter how old you are, how young you are, you are climbing with the Sangha. The Buddhist sangha has been here two thousand five hundred years and they will continue. Let us be part of that Sangha. Let us use that Sangha in order to form a larger Sangha.

The 21st century may be a very pleasant century for us. You may enjoy deeply the coming century if you know how to embark upon it with faith, with joy, and with insight. I am convinced that with the insight of interbeing, with the capacity of living as a Sangha, the climb will be very beautiful, very pleasant.

You are now at the foot of the hill and in just eleven days we will begin the climb. And we shall be climbing the hill of the century with our ancestors who are in us and with our children: blood ancestors and spiritual ancestors, blood children and spiritual children, hand in hand we will climb the century hill with joy. The only thing to remember is to do it as a Sangha, not as individuals any more. Climbing like that we need some freedom, some liberation: freedom of the self, liberation of the self, and the joy will be collective joy, it will be nourishing us.

Looking into the individual you see the collective and looking into the collective you see the individual and we know that with that insight we will be free. Happiness will not be possible without the happiness of those around us, including animals, vegetables and minerals. On the last day of the year, on the last day of the century we will be celebrating our togetherness according to a schedule offered to us by the brothers of the Upper Hamlet. We will have in the morning two hours of solitary meditation. In the morning we will gather and receive instructions as to how to practice two hours of solitary meditation.

Each of us can go somewhere and really work on it. With our suffering, our despair we can open up a new door for the future. We are determined to begin anew and we make a commitment with ourselves and with our ancestors and our children that we will do it

differently next year, next century. We will not allow individualism to prevail and to destroy. We will learn how to see the happiness of the Sangha as our own happiness and we will learn how to live as a cell in a body, as a bee in a beehive. Responsible, open, because when we are open we receive the information from other members of the Sangha, and we know what to do and what not to do in order for the Sangha to be happy.

The Sangha's will is the Buddha's will. The Sangha's will is God's will, and that is why we have to be open and to receive information. Sometime they don't use words but the way they think, the way they feel, the way they look, the way they act is very clear, and gives very clear messages. So, if we just keep open and then we receive the information. And we know perfectly what to do and what not to do in order to be a good member of the Sangha.

You know that the bees communicate, they communicate with their dance. The termites also, they use chemicals in order to communicate. Our thoughts, our words and our acts are made of energy that is a kind of chemicals. The way we are in a community is the way we communicate and if you are mindful enough, if you are open enough you receive the communication from the other members of the Sangha.

We know that in our brain the neurons they always fire their electrical impulses in order to keep the communication alive and continuous between themselves, they don't need a boss to tell them what to do. The neurons are capable of being there, open and in permanent communication. That is why they respond to other neurons, they collaborate with other neurons in such a wonderful way! We should learn from them.

When we play music we notice that the music and the rhythm create a kind of reaction in our brain. We know that oscillation patterns take place in various areas of the brain and there is a symphony taking place, a kind of orchestra coming together musically, without any director. If you remember the text, you see that the first moment of consciousness takes place in a fraction of a second ksana (Sanskrit) is the shortest unit of time. It is a moment of consciousness and that moment of consciousness is not the product of one neuron, it is a product of all the neurons together. It is like the flame, one ksana (Sanskrit), and if the second moment of consciousness takes place, it is thanks to the presence of the moment of consciousness that has just died. And the two moments of consciousness succeeding each other have a base, because without that base it cannot happen.

Look at the candle. We see the flame, we see the wax, we see the conditions like the oxygen and the flame cannot be there without a base. Because the base is always there that is why the flame can continue. Looking deeply into the flame you can see the base. The base is alaya vijnana, the root consciousness. But the root consciousness, alaya vijnana is not something that is apart from a moment of consciousness because looking deeply into the moment of consciousness which lasts only a fraction of a second we can see alaya vijnana, we can see the base. It is like looking at the flame we can see everything else, like the wax and so on.

Living in the community we are aware that every one of us has a base, the notion of base in Buddhism is very important. Ashraya (Sanskrit) means the base. Touching ourselves deeply, looking deeply into ourselves we can touch the base. And being able to touch our base we are able to realize the nature of interconnectedness within us and (with) the rest. It means our brothers and sisters, our brother tree, our sister rock, all our brothers and sisters. Looking into a rock we see the base, looking into a tree we see the base, looking into our brother we see the base. It is like looking into every Dharma we can see alaya vijnana, it is the same. And with that insight in us there is no longer any separation if we know how to respond and to react in a way that harmony will be possible in the Sangha, and in the larger Sangha because our Sangha has humans, animals, minerals and vegetables.

So the insight of no self, the insight of interbeing, the insight of interconnectedness if we can keep them alive, if we know how to cultivate that insight and keep it alive daily we will be free from the prison of self. We will be able to see the happiness of the Sangha as our own, this is very important. And that is why in two hours of solitary meditation we should do our best in order to work it out, to make that determination not to continue the ancient of way of life. We have to make a solemn promise to us and to our base and to everyone that we will be

different, we will learn to live as a Sangha. The family is a Sangha. The society is a Sangha. The Earth is a Sangha.

Two hours of solitary retreat on the 31st is a gift, whether you are here or you are in another place you are welcome to take at least two hours for your meditation. Look back at yourself, look back at the world and see how much suffering we have created. And we see the roots of the suffering, of isolation, of sorrow, of fear. We see our wrong perceptions, we know that in the past we were victims of our wrong perceptions. We believed so much in our perceptions. And practicing looking deeply we see how wrong we were in our perceptions. And we promise that we will not do like that again, we rely on the Sangha to have a better perception of reality because the Sangha eyes are always brighter, clearer than the eyes of an individual. This is exactly what we say when we declare, I take refuge in the Sangha. I take refuge in the Sangha, means I don't rely on my perceptions alone. I don't want to rely on my individual perceptions alone. I want to be ready to see, to look at things with the Sangha eyes. Using the Sangha eyes is a wonderful practice and that is our practice.

So during the two solitary hours we should take up that kind of resolution. We will promise that we will see with the Sangha eyes, look with the Sangha eyes, and feel with the Sangha heart. That will bring a lot of happiness and harmony into the Sangha, the small Sangha and the larger Sangha. In fact, the five skandhas, the five elements within us are also a Sangha. They find themselves in conflict very often.

So, the two hours of solitary retreat in Plum Village on the 31st is a gift. We will receive some instructions in how to do it and then we will spend two hours alone. Whether we go to the garden, we sit in the meditation hall, work it out and make a promise to yourself. You may like to have it written down in a piece of paper, a promise to yourself, a promise to your ancestors, a promise to your teacher, your promise to your brothers and sisters, your children. That is the most meaningful thing to do on the last day of the century, the last day of the year.

When the new century comes, when the New Year comes we will have finished our walking meditation and we'll come to this hall and we offer our prayer and our promises to our ancestors and our children. We have a special prayer for the new century, the New Year. In English, in German, in French and in Vietnamese and each of us will have a copy of that prayer, of that promise but you have your own promise you will make as an outcome of your two hours of solitary retreat. You may like to bring it along and after the collective prayers and promises you may like to read it for yourself, to your ancestors and to your children. The promise is made to our ancestors, to our brothers and sisters and also to our children, whether they are blood children or spiritual children, we have to make that promise. That promise will be made after those two hours of solitary meditation.

At some time we have lunch, a simple lunch, because the two hours of solitary retreat may happen during that time also, before lunch, after lunch, at least two hours. And then in the afternoon you may like to continue until the bell calls you for collective mindful work to prepare for the ceremony. At five o'clock in the afternoon will be the last Dharma talk of the year, last Dharma talk of the last century of the 21st century. And that Dharma talk will be relayed simultaneously to Germany and North America. We have the Dharma talk right here and our brothers and sisters in Germany and in America will have it through the telephone.

The Dharma talk will begin at 5pm and end at about 6:30pm and after that we may prepare ourselves for the practice of Touching the Earth. Touching the Earth is a further practice in order to connect with our ancestors, to connect with the land, to connect with other species and to connect with our children and their children, because our children and their children are already there in us. We have to be responsible to our children and their children. After the Dharma talk we'll take some time before we have dinner, and then instead of Dharma discussion we will do a Touching the Earth. Because I think Touching the Earth will be a deeper practice, Touching the Earth is to connect with our ancestors, with our brothers and sisters in the blood family, in the spiritual family, and also to connect with our children and their children who are already there within us. Touching the Earth we should finish before 10:30pm because at 11pm sharp there will be a bell to gather around the linden tree to receive

instructions as to how to do the walking meditation, because we will be climbing the new century together as a Sangha. This is a very special walking meditation. You really want to walk as a Sangha and not as individuals any more.
Have a seen a centipede? A little creature that has lots of…. Yeah! we walk like that! Thousands of feet! There will be a lot of us on that day! To walk in such a way that you can go as a Sangha. If it does not rain the walk will be very pleasant, if it rains we will walk anyway, we have to be equipped with an umbrella. On our path there will be kerosene lamps so that we can walk with ease. It must be a very deep kind of walking, walking as a Sangha. We have to walk in such a way that individuals will dissolve, for the Sangha to walk.
What is the English word for a centipede? Centipede? And we begin to walk at 11:30 or so, or earlier. We'll start from the linden tree and we really begin. The new century has not come yet at that time but we have half an hour in order to reach the other end of the road. When the New Year comes there will be bells, a little bit from everywhere, also from this meditation hall and you will know that the new century has arrived. We'll pause for one minute, to breathe, to be aware that the new century, the new millennium has arrived. Smile to it, and we begin to climb the new century together, with peace, with joy, as a Sangha. This is a very deep practice and joyful practice also. When you come up to the hill there will be a chariot with candles or lamps, and our children will come together and push the chariot which has the number 2000 on it. We will go directly from there to the meditation hall and our path will be lit with kerosene lamps, the brothers don't trust the electricity very much so they want to equip the path with kerosene lamps, hundreds of them.
So, the walk should be very joyful, silent, but powerful and joyful with the children leading. And when we come to the meditation hall we will arrive before the altar of our ancestors, blood and spiritual ancestors, we will light some incense and offer our prayers. Our prayer is to be connected with our ancestors, Sangha, children, and grandchildren. We should select members of the Sangha who can read the promises/prayers out loud in several languages. And each of us will receive a copy of that promise because we vow to live in such a way that the Sangha's happiness becomes our happiness. That is the only way to dissolve suffering and loneliness and to build a happy life for us and for our children in the next century.
After offering incense and flowers and fresh water to our ancestors and to the earth and to our children, then we practice touching the earth four times and it will be time for hugging meditation. And you may have your promise written on a piece of paper and you may like to come forth to the altar and you read it silently. You don't need to go to the altar in order to read it, you can do it anywhere, in the open air and you just read it to the sky and earth, and the ancestors will hear it. Your brothers and sisters and your children will hear it, and that is how we will live the moments of transition between the old year and the New Year.
Bell
At the beginning of this winter retreat I offered the Sangha a kind of homework, remember? And that is very much in line with these instructions, because the homework is the practice of looking deeply in order to see how we acted and reacted when a difficult situation came. The practice, the homework is to see clearly all these elements of that period in order for us to see another way, a better way, of acting and reacting so suffering will not be created for ourselves and for the people around us.
It is very important because if you have suffered during that period you have an opportunity to learn from that period of suffering, you make the vow not to be caught in these kind of perceptions any more. You make a vow to be more open in order to understand better and to respond better, with non violence, with love, with understanding. Then it is us who has the power to transform a situation. We are no longer victims of the situation.
We have the habit of thinking that our happiness depends so much on the situation around us. We have the habit of thinking that our happiness depends on the other person. We don't know that conditions for our happiness are plenty, more than enough for us to be happy. However, we get caught, we are not able of recognizing theses elements of happiness, they are there

already and we deprive ourselves of that happiness and also we deprive the loved ones of their happiness because we are not capable of being happy.
The capacity to be happy should be the object of our practice and we know the Buddha always repeated it. The present moment presents so many wonders of life, and there are so many positive ingredients, so many positive conditions for our happiness. But because we get caught in one idea we cannot make use of these conditions and to be happy in the here and the now. We always blame the situation, we always blame the other person or persons, so the practice is to liberate ourselves from that kind of habit knowing that happiness depends on us, not on the situation or on the other person.
The other person will have to practice very much in the same way. If we can change the way of looking we will dissolve unhappiness and then happiness will just come naturally. We don't have to change the situation, we don't have to change the other person. We accept the situation as it is, we accept the other person as he/she is, and suddenly we become very happy because we are free. We are not caught in our idea of happiness.
In each hamlet there is a wall gazette with the title Climbing the New Century together. I don't know if the brothers and the sisters have created enough space, it should be very large.
And here, 'Climbing Together The Hill', Thay has written in calligraphy these words in English, in French, and in Vietnamese. So, you are welcome to contribute an article for this gazette, you just come and stick that article on the board. Each person will have a space like this, enough for one sheet of paper. If your article is more than one page, you put the first page on the top and after having read the first page they will read the second page. And you may like to use the computer for your article, you may like to use handwriting. You make like to write a poem, a short story, you may draw something. But everything we do for that magazine, for that gazette is in order to think of climbing together the hill of the 21st century. Climbing the hill as a Sangha and not as individuals anymore.
And you may like to write in German, in English, in French, in Vietnamese and so on. We have ten days to enjoy doing that. You are too busy to do it? Shame! You are too busy? So we wish you all a very joyful Christmas and New Year, there will be a lot of people coming, especially for the New Year, and we should help them. How to help them? By practicing deeply. Practicing deeply because you have had the opportunity to receive the instructions during many weeks. We do it deeply and when they come you share with them the way to practice. It is very important. The Dharma teachers, the apprentice Dharma teachers, everyone has to help so that we will have a wonderful celebration of the New Year, of the New Century together. So it depends on how you help our friends when they come to understand the meaning of the practice.

[Bell]